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INTRODUCTION

This work attempts to consider a remote world through the material traces that it has left us. The world is that of the first millennium AD, in which Europe and the Mediterranean passed from Antiquity into the Middle Ages, barbarian Europe came under the influence of powerful social and economic forces, and the door was opened to the development of the Western world.

The first millennium presents a number of scholarly challenges. One of these is the interaction between the archaeological material and written sources – the latter, though essential, limited in number, the former increasing at an exponential rate and providing new information every day. The appeal of archaeology lies in its potential for new discoveries and for illumination of circumstances that written sources seldom or never touch upon – obscure aspects of life and geographical areas in which written sources are inadequate or non-existent. Furthermore, it is just as powerful a tool where there are written sources. It is a truism that one gets a very different impression from seeing a place than from simply reading about it, and the same applies to the material world revealed through archaeological surveys and excavations. It should also be taken into account that archaeology has an exciting interdisciplinary side, manifested in collaboration with the biological, natural, and social sciences and the other humanities, especially history. Finally, theory and method in archaeology have developed rapidly in the last few decades, in particular in the area of social history. The question increasingly being asked is what archaeology can tell us about past society – its economy, social systems, and mental attitudes.

The first millennium was the first period in which the various societies of the Old World, whether of northern Scandinavia, eastern Africa, or Japan, exercised direct influence on one another. The preceding millennium had witnessed the emergence of the Greco-Roman world, which periodically has had immeasurable influence on the development and self-comprehension of society, particularly in Western Europe. The decline and fall of especially the Western Roman Empire has fascinated scholars since long before the time of Gibbon (1776–88) (fig. 1).

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The first millennium AD

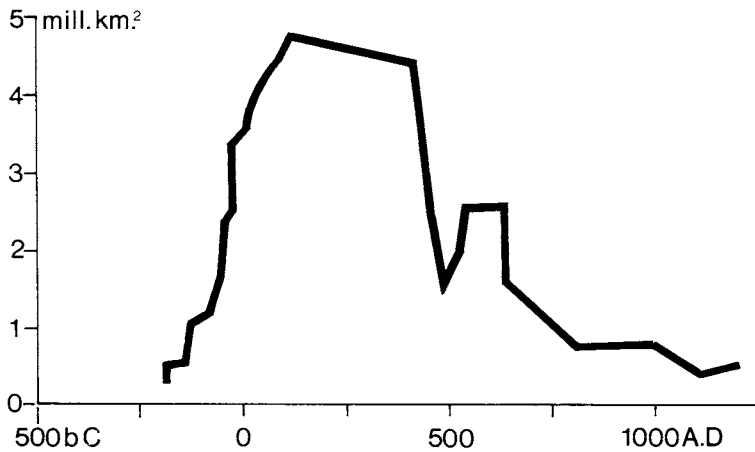


Fig. 1. The 'Roman Empire', from the third-century-BC confederate state in Italy through the Late Republican expanding territorial empire in the Mediterranean and in Gaul, the Early and Late Roman Empires proper, and the Eastern Empire to the Byzantine Empire of the beginning of the second millennium

The roots of Western European society lie at the end of the first millennium BC, but the idea of collapse has nevertheless dogged – at times virtually haunted – the West at least since the fifth century. It is odd, then, that we are not more surprised or pleased at the stability of Western Europe, which has already lasted for a millennium. One reason for this is probably that the world is still deeply absorbed by the problems of nation-states and less concerned with the fate of economic systems. It is in fact characteristic of Europe at the end of the second millennium that its economic systems function without the political framework established and maintained by the old empires and also once provided by nation-states. This is not, of course, to say that national ideologies and feelings of identity are irrelevant to social development. Just as in the time of the Roman Empire, they have a great influence on the pattern of events.

Western Europe, which today forms an integrated economic whole in competition with the countries beyond the dividing line of the bisected Germany, was under the Roman Empire divided into two apparently incompatible areas, one within the empire, one beyond its frontiers. With the fall of the Western Empire, barbarian princes who were able to provide the necessary military security came to dominate the old imperial provinces. This particular development was, however, hardly inevitable and could just as well have taken place under Roman petty emperors, kings, or warlords. Western Europe remained, moreover, even under the Germanic peoples, divided ethno-geographically. A new cohesion nevertheless came into being as formerly barbaric regions were incorporated into the mainstream through political alliances, trade, and exchange. Thus broad areas of Europe came to share a number of institutions ranging from a common

symbolic language, the Christian religion, regional and relatively weak princely powers, 'private' rights to resources, etc., to agrarian techniques and technical knowledge. Special significance must be ascribed to the development of the Islamic realm, politically and militarily first of all, for the remnants of the Eastern Roman Empire – Byzantium – but economically also for Western Europe, to which it provided resources and knowledge until the voyages of discovery around AD 1500. In comparison, the north-eastern countries of Europe played only a marginal role, although it must be conceded that archaeological work may some day alter this perception somewhat.

For linguistic, professional, and socio-historical reasons, this work concentrates on the geographical belt running north-west to south-east from Britain to the Levant, bounded on the west by Spain and on the north by southern Scandinavia. Archaeological material is the main focus, but information derived from written sources, especially those illuminating the economic and hence the associated social circumstances, is also taken into account. The reason for this is that archaeological method offers insight primarily into the economic aspects of the material sources, and the intention here is to provide a more broadly based socio-historical synthesis that includes culture and mental attitudes as well. The reader will search unsuccessfully, however, for any detailed treatment of many of the aspects of, for example, classical Roman culture that are normally found in a work of this general nature. Although this book is designed to require only limited background knowledge, it assumes that certain facts are generally known. I hope it will nevertheless arouse interest for the point of view it expresses and its treatment of the archaeological material and, particularly, that it will serve to build a bridge between disciplines.

Primarily, we shall be dealing with evidence of settlement and the information on subsistence economy, exchange, etc., that can be derived from it. Towns play a smaller part in the account than might be expected. The picture is, however, fleshed out with discussions of physical conditions and man's effect upon them, the cultivation of plants and livestock raising, the character of settlement in the various regions, the varying sizes, types, functions, and distribution patterns of towns, Roman forts, craft production (for instance, the production and distribution of pottery), developments in water transport, the changing character of minting, etc. In addition, there is discussion of Roman inscriptions, mosaics, and churches and of graves. The contents of graves illuminate the relationships between the sexes and between social strata and offer insight into cultural standards and patterns of 'private' behaviour that allows consideration of mental attitudes, art, and communication.

Because one of the central themes running through this account is an interest in historical and particularly socio-historical and economic processes, emphasis is placed on the development, where possible, of culture-historical sequences, especially those apparent in quantitative data. A typical example (fig. 2) builds on the excavations at the important and well-defined administrative, economic, and

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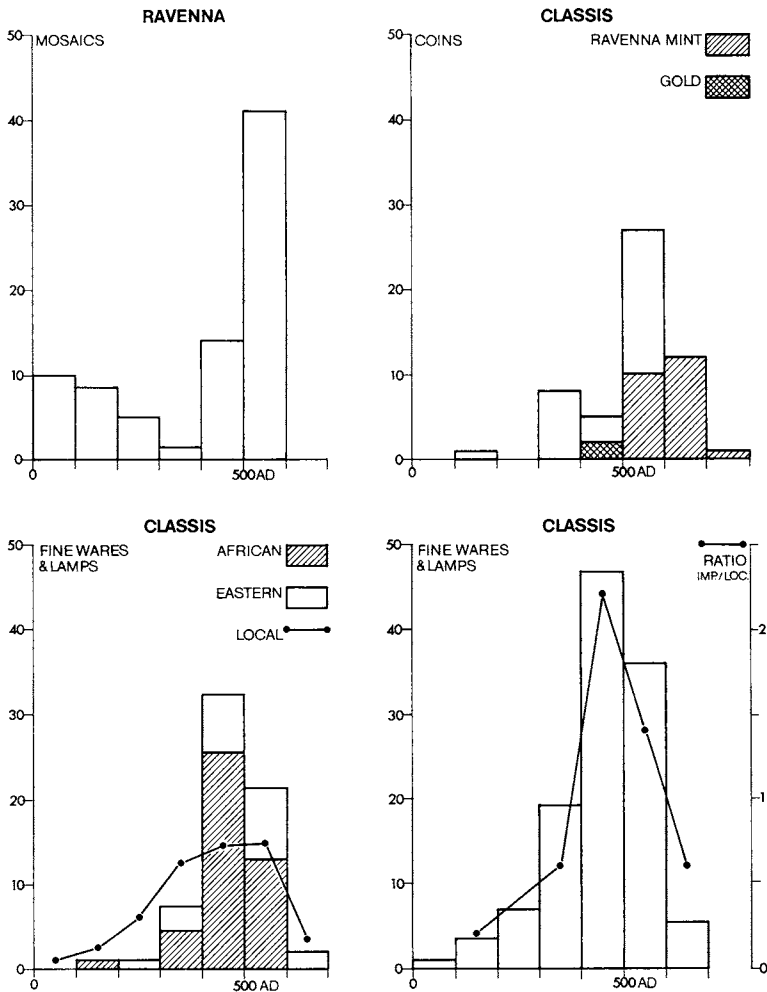


Fig. 2. Frequencies of mosaic pavements from Ravenna (Berti 1976) and changing numbers of (mainly base-metal) coins, fine ceramic wares, and lamps from an excavation at Classis, its port (Source: Montanari 1983)

cultural centre of Ravenna (Berti 1976, 1983; Coscarella 1983; Curima 1983; Maioli 1983; cf. Montanari 1983). The first graph of the figure shows the number of floor mosaics found at Ravenna that date from between the birth of Christ and AD 700, most of them falling between AD 400 and 600. The next three graphs relate to an important excavation in Ravenna's port, Classis, where the majority of buildings date from this same period. In the graph dealing with the coin material, it is notable that those dating from after AD 600 were all struck locally, probably reflecting the increasing regionalization of the market economy. In the third graph, relating to the finer pottery, it is apparent that imported 'African' (Tunisian) table-ware was important in the period AD 400–600. The

last graph indicates very active trade in the fifth century, even though it was then that the Western Empire collapsed. Thus the archaeological material from Ravenna provides us with a correction to the common perception that there is a positive correlation between political stability and trade. In addition, the evidence of the mosaic floors points to the sixth century as the period of most building activity. It was then, for example, that San Vitale, with its wall mosaics of the emperor Justinian and empress Theodora, was erected (Krautheimer 1965). At the same time, the pottery from the excavation indicates that finer wares of local origin were more important and wares imported from the East, the surviving area of the empire, more in evidence than before. The finds from Classis, though relatively few, correspond to those from other contexts.

Sequences such as this can thus serve as historical 'weather stations', and they demonstrate the great potential of archaeology for the identification and analysis of conditions within a chronological and spatial framework. Written sources help us to identify the content and character of the social development for which archaeology has established the framework; in other words, they elucidate the past structures observed in the archaeological material. Archaeological method can often be applied to the study of the written sources as well, giving them a topographical dimension often neglected in works of pure history and even in many archaeological ones.

In evaluating archaeological material it is important to understand that, roughly speaking, we are operating with two different kinds of source, one 'unconscious', consisting, for instance, of the remains of buildings, rubbish dumps, etc., the other 'conscious', comprising burials, cultic areas, etc. Assuming the necessary insight into the character, quality, and amount of the material in question, the unconscious type can be made to yield systematic testimony to past population development, economy, social structure, etc. It must, of course, be assumed that the character of the material does not vary within the area of interest. The conscious type, in contrast, must be treated with caution, because a 'cultic' filter has been inserted between the everyday life of the past and the archaeological material. This means that identical phenomena – for example, burials – may from an archaeological viewpoint be highly visible or almost invisible, depending on cultic norms. The number of graves recorded for periods or areas in which burial with rich grave goods was the custom will be greater than for situations in which graves are 'poor', without any necessary connection with population statistics or social structure.

For example, there is a considerable amount of material, both settlement traces and graves, from the first millennium in a small area of Lower Saxony near Lüchow (Harck 1977) (fig. 3). The settlements predominantly date from around the birth of Christ, the graves predominantly from the middle to end of the millennium. Part of the explanation for this disjunction lies in the fact that the settlements dating from the early part of the period are relatively easily recognized by their numerous rubbish pits, a phenomenon rare on the later sites. As is

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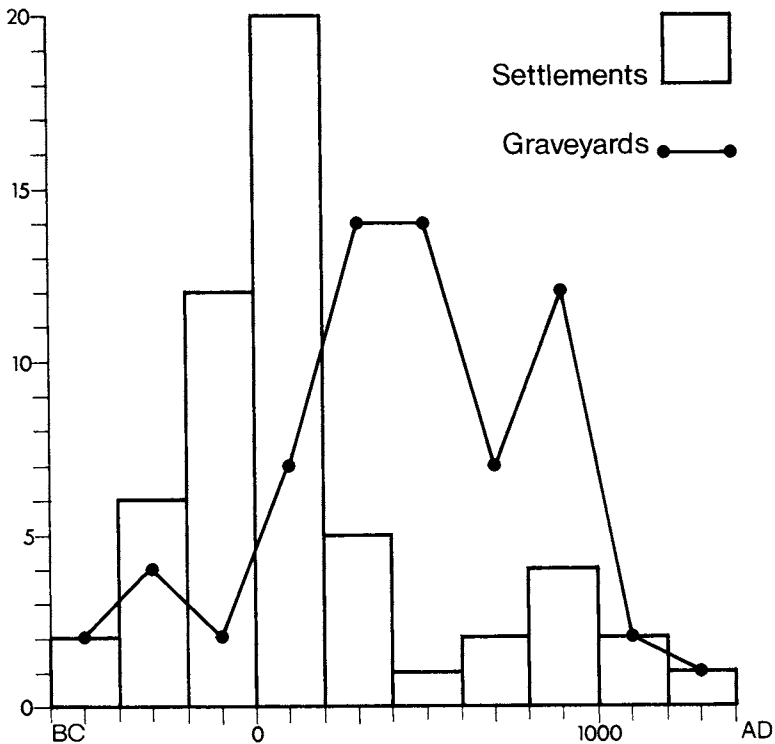


Fig. 3. Changing numbers of settlements and cemeteries from the late first millennium BC to the beginning of the second millennium AD in an area near Lüchow in Lower Saxony (Source: Harck 1977)

typical of barbarian areas in Central and Northern Europe, buildings were of timber in all of the settlements and this makes them far more difficult to recognize than Roman sites comprising the remains of stone buildings. Further, in the earlier period the quantity of grave goods was modest.

Another example may be found in a number of hoards, each containing several silver spoons, often decorated with Christian symbols, that have been found in the Mediterranean area and in other Roman or formerly Roman provinces (Milojčić 1968). The distribution of these hoards probably indicates the areas of manufacture and primary use of the spoons. The overwhelming majority of finds fall, however, along the Rhine–Danube line, where such spoons, almost always just a single one at a time, are fairly frequently found in barbarian graves dating from the post-Roman period. The Germanic and other peoples near the old imperial frontiers seem to have considered these spoons valuable exotics and included them in their rich grave goods, whereas in the ‘civilized’ regions they were not deposited in graves.

The crucial role that archaeology may play in reconstructing the first millennium is apparent from close examination of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, one of the main documents on the early history of Britain (Douglas and Greenaway 1953;

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Introduction

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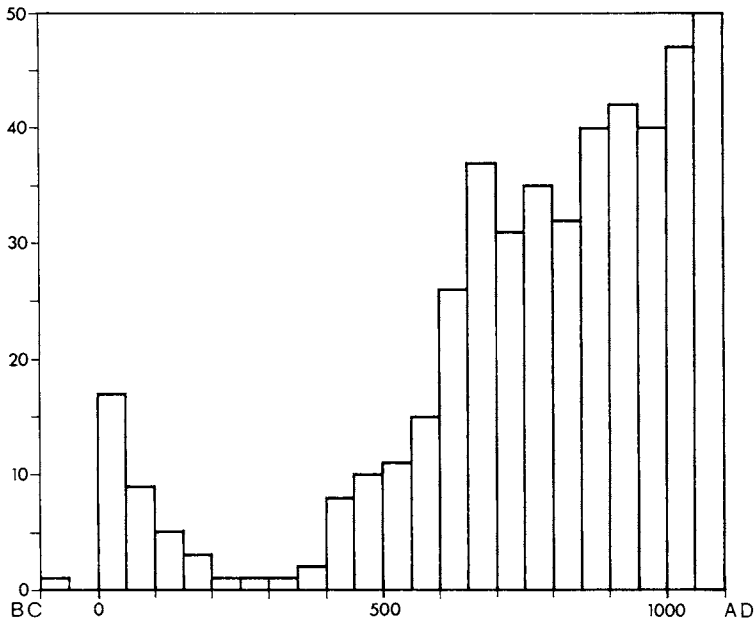


Fig. 4. Changing numbers of years for which there is information in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* per fifty-year period of the first millennium (Source: Douglas & Greenaway 1953; Whitelock 1955)

Whitelock 1955) (fig. 4). Most of the information that this document provides on the first millennium is political, military, or religious in character and concentrated in the later centuries. Information for each individual calendar year is given beginning only in the latter half of the eleventh century; there is very little information relating to the time before AD 600 and especially before AD 400, where only archaeology can 'write' the local history of Britain. (The Early Roman period – before AD 200 – constitutes an exception but the information relating to this period is derived from later copies of classical works surviving elsewhere.)

As time passes and archaeological source material increases in quantity and quality, we can expect the history of the first millennium to be modified in a number of respects. Our understanding of historical processes may well eventually be based chiefly on the material sources, with the written sources serving more to fill in the gaps, for example, in studies of past cultural milieus and mental attitudes and of matters requiring detailed chronological information and in the elaboration of new methods for studying the material data. This essay may be seen as an attempt to show what can be done by taking the material data as a point of departure, even when the period in question is well known to written history, and thus to demonstrate the great potential of the archaeological sources for providing systematic information about the past. It is, however, important to remember that archaeology primarily compares and interprets patterns that it has itself identified and does not necessarily tell us whether these patterns apply in other contexts or, indeed, correspond to past reality.

2

THE HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK

The first millennium can for convenience be divided into intervals of about two hundred years each. Although this division appears arbitrary, it allows us to set our period boundaries at about the times when some of the crucial historical and social changes of the millennium took place. Regional differences do not seem significant, probably because the trends of development in the various regions were for the most part linked. This is not, however, to say that these trends were congruent: progress can perfectly well be made in one area at the same time as there is crisis or regression in another. Thus we find five main periods: AD 0–200, the Early Roman or Early Empire period; 200–400, the Late Roman or Late Empire period; 400–600, Late Antiquity and the beginnings of the Germanic successor states; 600–800, the Early Byzantine, Early Islamic, and, for the eighth century, Early Carolingian period; 800–1000, the Middle Byzantine and Islamic periods and, for the tenth century, the initial phases of the Western European state societies. (For later Western Europe alone, one might have operated with the periods AD 500–700, 700–900, and 900–1100.) The following brief description of each of these periods draws in part on the written sources (which, as noted above, particularly concern political and military affairs) and in part on the archaeological evidence – chiefly architecture, settlement, and trade and exchange – to be considered in detail in the chapters that follow.

To provide a sense of direction in this vast and complex material, another – again apparently arbitrary – approach is suggested. Throughout the first millennium every other century is characterized by profound social change and associated economic or other disruption. The intervening centuries are just as clearly marked by relatively stable social conditions. Centuries with odd numbers are unstable, centuries with even ones stable. The first, third, fifth, seventh, and ninth centuries are therefore centuries of change; the second, fourth, sixth, eighth, and tenth centuries of consolidation. In the first century the Roman Empire came into being, and at the same time profound changes occurred both in the conquered societies and in the unconquered ones beyond the imperial

frontiers. The third century was a time of crisis and structural reorganization in the empire. In the fifth century, the time of great migrations, the Western Roman Empire collapsed. In the seventh century the Eastern or Byzantine realm was reduced and restructured as a result of Islamic expansion. In the ninth century a number of new social collapses and transformations took place, ranging from that of the Carolingian realm in the west to that of the Abbasid dynasty in Mesopotamia in the east. In addition, there were new 'migrations' and raids, for instance those of the Vikings. In contrast, the second century was the golden age of the Roman Empire while the fourth saw the reconstruction of the Constantinian empire, the sixth the reconstitution of the Justinian empire, the eighth the birth of the Carolingian realm, early Abbasid Islam, etc., and the tenth the emergence of state societies in Western Europe and elsewhere.

This scheme of course is subject to the criticism that hundred-year periods are no divinely instituted scale for the categorization of historical events. It is, however, possible that one to two centuries was the maximum life-span of a highly developed society in early Europe and the Mediterranean, perhaps because of degradation of the core lands of the early states and empires. In any case, these divisions can serve as a heuristic device. The following survey, which is brief and supported for the moment by no argument or documentation (but see appendix 1), should be considered only an *aide-mémoire*.

AD 0–200

The Early Roman period begins with the founding of the Roman Empire and covers its final military expansion, including the conquest of Britain and later of Dacia (fig. 5). During this period the infrastructure of the northern provinces was extended by means of roads, forts, towns (for example, veterans' colonies), and, in the agricultural sector, villas, a process often known as 'Romanization'. The first phase of this development was accompanied by unrest and frontier skirmishes. Nevertheless, particularly in societies that were already highly organized and stratified, it was possible for Romanization to take place relatively painlessly. The Roman secret was to engage the local élites in the development process, thus making them the underpinnings of the structure. Romanization did not, however, proceed without profound social and economic changes, and it cannot be overlooked that in many areas Roman occupation was accompanied by economic regression in a number of sectors. The empire itself, however, did not invest very large sums in the military or in administration, and the Roman élite was certainly able to profit greatly from the development. The early Roman Empire was organized around autonomous town and tribal territories, a form of organization typical in both the ancient and the Northern Alpine world. In addition to cultural norms, the Romans had also acquired much technical and economic knowledge from earlier Mediterranean, particularly Greek and Hellenistic, traditions. A large part of the workforce in the central and western regions

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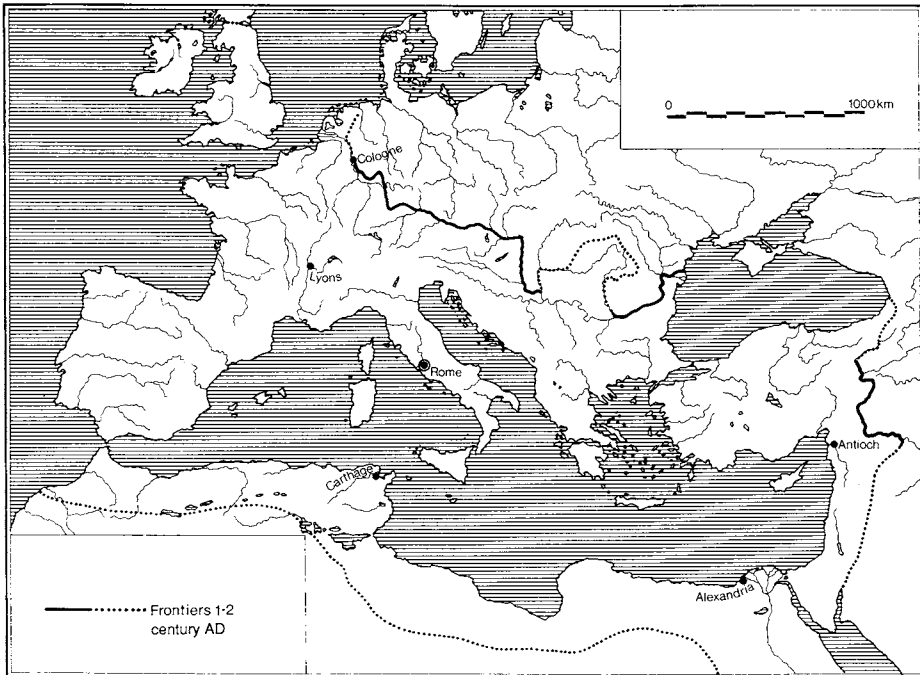
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Fig. 5. The Early Roman Empire

of the empire – its heartland and development area – was made up of slaves, often the spoils of wars under the late republic and the very early empire. The slave economy was less pronounced in the last part of this period, although slaves continued to be numerous throughout the millennium.

North of the empire this period was marked by the efforts of societies to adapt to new circumstances. Traditional, thousand-year-old relations with the southern tribes had been severed by the Roman expansion and replaced by new but strictly regulated connections with the empire itself. One of the consequences of the Roman conquest was the disappearance of the most advanced communities to the north and east of the Alps, in particular the Celtic and Dacian *oppida*. East of the Rhine, in contrast, many Germanic Iron Age societies persisted, characterized by simple village settlements with farmsteads, the core of each of which was a longhouse that sheltered both the family and its livestock. To the south-east, the Roman Empire faced the Persian or Parthian kingdom, but in the Early Roman period this posed no very great military or political problem. At the end of the period, in AD 166–180, the battles known as the Marcomannic wars were fought along the Danubian frontier. These hostilities revealed a number of weaknesses in the Roman armies and occurred, furthermore, at a time when the internal economy of the empire was already ailing.